A BRIEF USER'S GUIDE TO

OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY

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[http://www.openspaceworld.com/users_guide.htm]

THE REQUIREMENTS OF OPEN SPACE

Open Space Technology requires very few advance elements. There must be a clear and compelling theme, an interested and committed group, time and a place, and a leader. Detailed advance agendas, plans, and materials are not only un-needed, they are usually counterproductive. This brief User's Guide has proven effective in getting most new leaders and groups off and running. While there are many additional things that can be learned about operating in Open Space, this will get you started. Some material has been included here which also appears in the book in order to present a relatively complete picture.

THE THEME -- Creation of a powerful theme statement is critical, for it will be the central mechanism for focusing discussion and inspiring participation. The theme statement, however, cannot be a lengthy, dry, recitation of goals and objectives. It must have the capacity to inspire participation by being specific enough to indicate the direction, while possessing sufficient openness to allow for the imagination of the group to take over.

There is no pat formulation for doing this, for what inspires one group will totally turn off another. One way of thinking about the theme statement is as the opening paragraph of a truly exciting story. The reader should have enough detail to know where the tale is headed and what some of the possible adventures are likely to be. But "telling all" in the beginning will make it quite unlikely that

the reader will proceed. After all, who would read a story they already know?

THE GROUP -- The group must be interested and committed. Failing that, Open Space Technology will not work. The key ingredients for deep creative learning are real freedom and real responsibility. Freedom allows for exploration and experimentation, while responsibility insures that both will be pursued with rigor. Interest and commitment are the prerequisites for the responsible use of freedom. There is no way that we know of to force people to be interested and committed. That must be a precondition.

One way of insuring both commitment and interest is to make participation in the Open Space event completely voluntary. The people who come should be there because they want to be there. It is also imperative that all participants know what they are getting into before they arrive. Obviously they can't know the details of discussions that have yet to take place. But they can and should be made aware of the general outlines. Open Space is not for everybody, and involuntary, non-informed participation is not only a contradiction in terms, it can become very destructive.

This raises the obvious question of what to do with those people whom you want to involve, but who, for whatever reason, do not share your desire. There are two possibilities. The first is to schedule two sessions, and trust that the first one will be so rewarding that positive word of mouth testimony will draw in the recalcitrant. The alternative is to respect the wishes of those involved. In the final analysis it remains true that genuine learning only takes place on the basis of interest and commitment, and there is absolutely no way to force any of that.

The size of the group is not absolutely critical. However, there does seem to be a lower limit of about 20. Less than 20 participants, and you tend to lose the necessary diversity which brings genuine interchange. At the upward end of the scale, groups of 400 work very well, and there is no reason to believe that number could not be increased.

SPACE -- The space required is critical, but need not be elaborate or elegant. Comfort is more important. You will need a room large enough to hold the entire group, with space to spare in which the

participants may easily move about. Tables or desks are not only unnecessary, but will probably get in the way. Movable chairs, on the other hand, are essential.

The initial setup is a circle with a large, blank wall somewhere in the room. The wall must be free from windows, doors, drapes, and with a surface that permits taping paper with masking tape. The wall should also be long enough so that the total group may stand before it, and never be more than three to four deep. The center of the circle is empty, for after all we are talking about Open Space.

If the room is very large, additional break-out areas may not be required, but they are always helpful. Best of all is the sort of environment in which there is an abundance of common space. If you are going to use a conference center or hotel, find one with plenty of conversation nooks, lobbies, and open grounds, where people may meet and work undisturbed, and without disturbing others.

TIME -- The time required depends on the specificity of result you require. Even a large group can achieve high levels of interaction combined with a real sense of having explored the issues in a matter of eight hours. However, if you want to go deeper than that, reaching firm conclusions and recommendations (as would be the case for strategic planning or product design), the time required may stretch to two or three days.

More important than the length of time is the *integrity* of the time. Open Space Technology will not work if it is interrupted. This means that "drop-ins" should be discouraged. Those who come must be there at the beginning, and stay for the duration if at all possible. By the same token, once the process begins, it cannot be interrupted by other events or presentations. These might come before or afterwards, but never in the middle.

THE BASIC STRUCTURE

Although it is true that an Open Space event has no pre-determined agenda, it must have an overall structure or framework. This framework is not intended to tell people what to do and when. Rather, it creates a supportive environment in which the participants can solve those issues for themselves. Minimal elements of this framework include: Opening, Agenda Setting, Open Space, and Conclusion. These elements will suffice for events lasting up to a day. Longer events will require the addition of Morning Announcements, Evening News, and probably a Celebration.

A standard Open Space Design, using all these elements appears below. If the event you anticipate lasts longer than the time indicated, simply replicate the middle day. If shorter, you will find that an Opening, Open Space, and Conclusion will suffice. Generally speaking, the minimum time required is five hours, but that is cutting it rather close.

OPENING -- We have found that a very informal opening works well, especially if the group involved is an intact work group. An evening meal and a time for catch-up conversation will effectively set the stage. Should the group not have any prior association, the simple device of having all the participants introduce themselves by giving their names and telling a short story from their lives to illustrate who they are will usually do the job. Detailed and involved "icebreaking" exercises do not seem to work very well, and more to the point, set the wrong tone. After all, we want Open Space.

AGENDA SETTING -- This is the time for the group to figure out what it wants to do. The details for this procedure are given below.

OPEN SPACE -- is exactly what the words imply, open space and time for the group to do its business. There is literally nothing here at the start.

ANNOUNCEMENTS -- A short period every morning for the group to catch up on what it is doing, where, when, and how. Nothing elaborate, no speeches, just the facts, nothing but the facts.

EVENING NEWS -- This is usually a time for reflection and occasionally fun. Not to be confused with a formal report-out session, the approach is "What's the story?" -- with participants voluntarily providing the tale.

CELEBRATION -- If your Open Space event is like all the ones we have seen, particularly multi-day affairs, by the last night it will time to celebrate, otherwise known as having a party. Even in "serious" undertakings like preparation of the corporate strategic plan, when it is over, it is over, and people will enjoy celebrating that fact. We suggest doing the celebration in the spirit and manner of the rest of the event. All of which means don't plan it in advance. It may be worthwhile to have some taped music if your people are inclined to dance, but other than that you will undoubtedly find that the talent you need is already available in the folks you have. Use it. Skits, songs, humorous reviews of what has happened, will amply fill the evening, and add to the learning experience.

CLOSING -- We try to keep the closing simple and serious. Simple in that there are no formal presentations and speeches. But serious, for this is the time for announcing commitments, next steps, and observations about what the event has meant. The closing event is best conducted in a circle with no "head table." Start anywhere, and go around the circle allowing each participant, *who wants to*, the opportunity to say what was of significance and what they propose to do. But do make it clear that nobody has to say anything. In very large groups, hearing from everybody is obviously impossible, but two or three folks may be asked to volunteer.

FORMAL REPORTS -- The formal report-out session has apparently become a fixture of conference life. However, we find it to be boring and generally non-productive. There is never enough time for each group to say all they wanted to, and if sufficient time is allocated, the majority of conference participants are uninterested at any given time. As an alternative, we recommend using a simple word processing system, a computer conferencing system, or both.

In a recent conference 200 participants created 65 task force reports (a total of 200 pages) which were available as the participants left the conference. Mechanically, all that is required is a bank of computers (low-powered laptops will do) and a request to each group organizer to enter the results of their deliberations into the system. They can either type it in themselves, or for the "non-typables," a small group of secretaries will do the job. We print out each report as it is entered and hang it on the wall, providing an ongoing, real-time record of the discussions. The obvious advantage here is that participants find out what is happening, as it is happening, rather than waiting until the end when it is too late. Of course, having the proceedings at the end of conference, rather than six months later, is a pleasant and positive surprise.

MEALS -- You will notice that meals are not listed on the agenda, nor are there any coffee breaks. The reason is quite simple: once the conference starts to operate in small groups, there is usually never a time when something of substance is not going on. And in accord with the Third Principle, it will take place in its own time. All of this creates a small, but not insoluble, problem for such things as meals and coffee-breaks. Our solution has been to have coffee and other refreshments available in the main meeting room, so people partake when they are ready. No need for the whole group to get into lockstep, and stop an important discussion just because it is coffee-break time. Likewise with meals. We suggest buffets, open and available over a several hour period, so people can eat when they want to. There are two exceptions to the flexible meal/coffee-break schedule: an opening dinner if there is one, and dinner on the last night.

The whole point is that the pacing and timing of the conference must be determined by the needs of the group and its learning process, and not by the requirements of the kitchen.

LEADERSHIP

The leadership of an Open Space event is at once absurdly simple and very tricky. The simplicity derives from the fact that the group itself will, and must, generate its own leadership. The tricky part comes in *letting* that happen. The demands placed upon the initial group leader are therefore limited and critical. Dealing with the limited aspects of group leadership is easiest and may therefore be done first. The functions here are to set time, place, and theme. Time and place are simply a question of where and when, both of which have been discussed above. Setting the theme involves creating the written theme statement describing where the group is starting, and where it hopes to go in general terms.

Now we come to the tricky part. Leadership in Open Space requires a style that some may find uncomfortable and counter-intuitive. This is especially true for those who equate leadership with control. There is no question that when we know exactly what we are doing, and where we want to go (as is presumably the case, for example, in a manufacturing process), tight controls are essential. In fact, control is the very heart of good management. We get into trouble, however, when we understand leadership simply as advanced management, and therefore, if the manager controls, the leader must control absolutely. Sensitive leaders today, in a world marked by progressively expanding Open Space, know all too well that most of what they have to deal with is beyond their control, and maybe out of control.

Leadership defined as control can only fail. But that is not the only definition. Gandhi described the leader as one who intuits which way the parade is moving, and then races to reach the head of it. The function of leadership is to provide a focal point for direction, and not to mandate and control a minute-by-minute plan of action. The details must be left to the troops, which means amongst other things, the troops must be trusted. In no case can any leader possibly solve all problems or direct all actions. Leadership in Open Space requires that one set the direction, define and honor the space, and let go.

There are Four Principles and One Law which serve as guides to the leader and all participants. The principles are: Whoever comes is

the right people. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have. Whenever it starts is the right time. When it is over, it is over.

The first principle reminds everyone of the obvious fact that those present are the only ones there. Whatever gets done will get done with them, or not at all. There is little point, therefore in worrying about all those who should have come, might have come, but didn't come. It is essential to concentrate on those who are there. The experience is that, in some strange way, the group present is always the right group.

In more practical terms, it has been discovered that if the group is deeply involved in the issue at hand and excited by the possibilities, that involvement and excitement are contagious, and others will soon join in. Even if the technical expertise present is not of the highest order, a committed group will find the needed expertise. However, if all the time is spent in telling each other that the group is neither right nor competent, it is always the case that the group will live down to it expectations.

None of this is to suggest that effort should not be made before the gathering to be sure that invitations are extended to critical people. Or indeed that those critical people should not be specially urged to attend. However, when the gathering starts, it is unarguably true: those who came are the ones who came. Whatever gets done will be done by them, or not at all. They will be the right people.

The second principle is yet another statement of the obvious. Given the theme (job) at hand and the people in attendance, whatever happens is the only thing that could have. Change the people, time, place, or theme, and something different will result. It is, of course possible that the result of the gathering could be a miserable failure, but experience shows that such a negative result is usually the product of negative expectations. Expect the worst, and you will very often get it.

Expectations are in fact critical. Be prepared to be surprised -- positively. Those who come to an Open Space event with a precise and detailed list of intended outcomes will be frustrated. More than that, they will inevitably miss the positive and useful things that occur. Never before, and never again will the assembled group gather in that time and place. No one could possibly predict the synergism of effect that will take place when those particular people assemble. Some of what happens will be non-useful. But it is the special function of the leader to raise the expectations of the group, and heighten their sensitivity to the opportunities at hand, whatever they may be.

Here is the most difficult and important point about leadership in Open Space. *The leader must truly trust the group to find its own way*. Attempts on the part of the leader to impose specific outcomes or agenda will totally abort the process. Any person who is not fully prepared to let go of their own detailed agenda should not lead.

The third principle will seem essentially wrong to those whose lives have been dictated by the clock, which is basically all of us. The conventional wisdom says that if you want to get something done, you must start on time. The conventional wisdom is right so long as you know what you are going to do, and how. On the other hand, when creativity, and real learning are involved, the clock can be more of a detriment than an assist. Things will start when they are ready, and whenever they start is the right time. In fact, when the creative learning moment arrives, it seems to create its own time, or put another way, clocks don't seem to matter much anymore. The Open Space environment provides the nutrient setting for creative activity, and those who would lead in that environment must keep their eye on the creative process and forget about the clock. When "it" happens, it will happen in its own time, and scheduling a breakthrough for 10 am is not only an exercise in futility, it is consummately destructive of Open Space.

Open Space Events do, of course, occur in time, which means that there must be a time of beginning and a time for closure. But everything in the middle must be allowed to run its own course.

The final principle, "When it is over, it is over," again states the obvious, but it is a point we may forget. Deep learning and creativity both have their own internal life cycle. They may take more or less time, but when they come to completion, they are over. Occasionally this means that we have to spend more time than we had planned, but more often than not, the reverse is true. The creative moment has a nasty habit of occurring very quickly, and just because the session or meeting was scheduled to take two hours is no reason to sit around and waste time after the moment has passed. When it is over, it is over.

Finally we come to the One Law of Open Space. It is a law only in the sense that all participants must observe it or the process will not work. We call it the Law of Two Feet. Briefly stated, this law says that every individual has two feet, and must be prepared to use them. Responsibility for a successful outcome in any Open Space Event resides with exactly one person -- each participant. Individuals can make a difference and must make a difference. If that is not true in a given situation, they, and they alone, must take responsibility to use their two feet, and move to a new place where they can make a difference. This departure need not be made in

anger or hostility, but only after honoring the people involved and the space they occupy. By word or gesture, indicate that you have nothing further to contribute, wish them well, and go and do something useful.

WHEN NOT TO USE

OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY

As there are individuals who should not lead in Open Space, there are also situations in which Open Space Technology is not appropriate, and in fact may be counter-productive. Open Space Technology is effective when real learning, innovation, and departure from the norm are required. When you aren't quite sure where you are, and less than clear about where you are headed, and require the best thinking and support from all those who wish to be involved, Open Space Technology will provide the means.

On the other hand, if the present state, and future position are crystal clear, along with all the intervening steps, Open Space Technology is not only a waste of time, it will be very frustrating. Using a very mundane example, if the task at hand is the implementation of a known technology, such as a word processing program, or an established office procedure, inviting people to be creative and inventive is quite beside the point. They simply have to learn the skills and methods required. There is no mystery. Just do it.

CREATING OPEN SPACE -- Introducing The Event

With the preamble out of the way, it is time to get on with the event. What follows is a walkthough of the format we have used. But please do not treat it as an unchangeable script. The needs of your group and your own style will ultimately determine the best way.

If this is a "first time" for you as a leader, we strongly suggest that you take a practice run through. Start by becoming completely familiar with the walkthough material provided below. Imagine that you are actually leading a group, and read through the script. Do this until you don't need the script, and then go one step further. Forget the script's words and use your own. At that point, you are probably ready for a real group, but don't make your first effort "the critical one." Find some friends and colleagues who are willing guinea pigs. They should have fun, and so should you. As a matter of fact, having fun is the key indicator that you are ready to take on a group for real. If it isn't fun, don't do it. Maybe you should never do it, or maybe you just need more practice. But HAVE FUN.

Assume that your group is now assembled in a circle, with a large blank wall behind them. You walk into the center and begin:

"Our theme for this gathering is _____. In the next __days, we are going to develop our best thoughts around the issues and opportunities associated with our theme.

As we start, I want you to notice the blank wall. That is our agenda. Just out of curiosity, how many times have you ever been to a meeting where the agenda was a completely blank wall?

If you are wondering how you ever got into all this, or even more, how you will ever get out, you should know that while Open Space Technology is a new approach, it is not untried. Groups all over the world, some as large as 400, regularly create their own agendas for multi-day meetings in less than one hour. They then proceed to self-manage the whole affair. While this is not a contest, there is no reason for you to do less well than those who have gone before you."

It is worthwhile to pause a moment here. Let them look at the blank wall and really understand that there is no agenda except as they

make it. Some people will beginning to feel rather nervous, and others will be demonstrably so, but nervousness (anxiety) at this point is a plus, for it represents available energy or spirit just waiting to happen. The art is to wait long enough for it to build, but not so long that people will question what they are doing, or worse yet begin a discussion about the whole process. If that sort of discussion begins, you will have lost the moment. So pause for a moment, and then move on.

"**To get `from here to there' we will use two very simple mechanisms -- the Community Bulletin Board, and the Village Market Place. In a few moments, I will ask you to identify any issue or opportunity you see around our theme, give it a short title and write that down on the paper provided. Then stand up in front of the group, say what your issue is, and post the paper on the wall. Make sure that you have some real passion for this issue, and that it is not just a good idea for somebody else to do. For you will be expected to take personal responsibility for the discussion. That means saying where and when the group will meet, convening the group, and entering the results of your discussion into our computer system (if you are using a system). You may offer as many issues as you like, and if at the end of the day, you do not see your issue on the wall, there is exactly one person to complain to. Yourself.**

"Once all the issues are up, we will then open the Village Market Place, and everybody will be invited to come to the wall and sign up for as few or as many of the groups as they desire. From there on out, you are in charge.

"Even though Open Space is truly open, there are some principles and one law that we need to keep in mind. The Four Principles are. . . [see above]. And the Law is what we call the Law of Two Feet. Everybody has them. . . . [see above]."

We find it helpful to write the Four Principles and One Law out on a large piece of paper which may be hung on the wall for future reference.

"Keeping the Four Principles in mind, along with the One Law, it is now time to get to work. Along that line, there is one question to start. *What are the issues and opportunities around our theme, for which you have real passion and will take genuine responsibility?*

"And when you have identified an issue or area, give it a short title, write it down on the paper provided and sign it. Leave some room at the bottom for others to sign."

If you have a relatively large group (25 and up) it is helpful to have paper available in a pile in the center of the circle. A basket of magic markers will also help. The paper should be large enough so that when taped to the wall it may be easily read by the group from a distance of about 10 feet.

"As soon as you are ready, stand up where you are, read out your title, and tape it to the wall. Don't wait to be asked. Go when you are ready."

Keep on going until everybody with a subject they want to work on has posted it on the wall. There will be a certain amount of noise and confusion, which is positive and good, but keep it down a little bit so people can hear. Most important, don't let the people start to discuss any of the items at this point. There will be plenty of time for that.

When it seems that all the items have been posted on the wall, ask if there are any more, and direct the group's attention to the wall. If your group is like all others we have worked with, the wall should now be covered with things to do. You might say something like:

"For those of you who wondered whether we would have something do, you might take a look at our wall. You might also note that we have generated the items for our agenda in less than _____ minutes.

"Our next act is to figure out who is going to do what, when, and where. To move that business, I would ask that every person who has an item on the wall go up and write down the time and place where your group will meet.

"Make sure your name is on the paper. For example, your group will meet from 10 to 12 o'clock in conference room C, or maybe out by the swimming pool. Space is on a first come, first served basis."

Prior to this part of the program, the leader should post a list of available meeting places. Of course if you are the only group meeting in a conference center, the space problem is simplified, and the groups can meet anywhere they feel comfortable.

"Don't worry about conflicts. We'll work all that out in a moment. Once you have selected a time, move your paper to the appropriate part of the wall. If you want to meet early, put it on the left side. For the end of the meeting, put it on the right. Those who want to gather in the middle, put it in the middle."

For meetings lasting longer than one day, it is helpful to divide the wall with tape into as many sections as there are days. You might also post *Morning Announcements* with a time at the beginning of each day, and *Evening News* just before supper. Additional time demarcations are not needed, and tend to get in the way.

"While they are doing that, all the rest of you might also stand up and take a look at the various offerings. When you find one that interests you, where you could learn or contribute, sign your name on the bottom. Sign up for as many as you like, and don't worry about conflicts. We'll take

care of them in a minute. It may seem a little chaotic, but it turns out that chaos is the way the fields of the mind are plowed so that new ideas can grow."

At this point, things are likely to get pretty noisy, and some might say chaotic. Leaders used to having things happen in relative silence, and in strict order may get very nervous. It is all right to be nervous, but don't try to straighten things out. THE GROUP WILL TAKE CARE OF ITSELF. A little chaos at this point is a good and necessary thing. First of all, everybody probably needs a stretch and some conversation. But most of all the rising noise level is a positive indication that the group is getting to work, and good things are happening.

Let the group bubble along for a few minutes, but before long some people will start to experience conflicts. They want to go to two different groups which are supposed to meet at the same time. Or two different groups are scheduled to meet in the same place at the same time. When you sense this happening, or even if you don't, stand up and get the group's attention. You may have to raise your voice, but noise won't hurt.

"Some of you may be finding a few conflicts, but it should be easy to work out. It is called negotiation. If you want to go to two groups meeting at the same time, find the group leaders and see if you can get them to merge their sessions or change their times. Of course, if they won't do that, you will just have to make a choice, but that is the way life is.

"From here on out -- you are on your own. As soon as your group is ready to go to work, go to it. We'll see you all back here at _____ [Evening News, Closing Session, whatever]."

We find it very useful at this point for the leader to actually leave the room, if only for a cup of coffee. It really makes the point, as little else could, that each individual and the total group are now responsible for what happens.

From here on out, the role of the leader will be infinitely less visible, but very important. There are, of course, several specific things to

be done, such as convening the Morning Announcements, Evening News, and the Closing Session. The leader should also make arrangement for the collection of the conference out-put if a record of formal decisions and deliberations is required. This may be as simple as having flip-charts transcribed, or even better, insuring that the computer conferencing system is up, accessible, and used.

One most important function on the leader's to do list is to take care of the room and the wall where the created agenda lies. We find ourselves spending a lot of time in that room, sometimes doing little more than picking up coffee cups, or re-taping agenda items that have come unglued. This may seem trivial and non-useful, but at the symbolic level it is a powerful statement of the leader's concern for the common space. On a more practical level, it usually turns out that the initial meeting room plays the role of "Mission Control." It is the place where everybody, sooner or latter, drops by to see what's happening or where to go next. Simply by being there, it is possible to keep tabs on how everything is coming along.

The major function of the leader, however, is not to do certain, specific things, but rather to sustain the atmosphere of Open Space. In most cases this involves little more than walking about and seeing how things are going. When difficulty is encountered, it is important not to take charge, but rather to throw responsibility back on those who need to hold it. For example, it is not unlikely that one or two of the participants will find themselves slightly lost, and come to the leader expecting to be told what to do. An appropriate response would be a question -- "What would you like to do?" followed up with the assurance that there is nothing wrong with doing nothing. It may just be that some individuals' unique contribution will be made by sitting under a tree and thinking all by themselves. The result of that thinking may show up in a later session, at the Evening News, or six weeks later in a company meeting. Open Space requires real freedom, and real responsibility.

Sometimes it happens that overly zealous participants feel that their ideas are so important or powerful that everybody in a particular group (or even in the whole conference) should pay attention and listen. This one has to be nipped in the bud -- carefully. The way out is not to directly challenge the person, but rather to remind the assembled group of the Law of Two Feet. If everybody truly wants to listen, they should do that. But if that is not their desire, they have two feet which they should use. There is no need to argue and shout, just thank the group and leave. Egomaniacs quickly get the picture when everybody leaves.